



October 16, 2020
Chair Senfronia Thompson
Public Health Committee
Texas House of Representatives

RE: Comments in Response to Formal Request for Information – Interim Charge 1

Dear Chair Thompson and Members of the House Public Health Committee:

Young Invincibles appreciates the opportunity to provide information and input on how Texas is shaping its women, maternal, and infant health programs in response to the Notice of Formal Request for Information posted on Monday, October 5, 2020.

Young Invincibles (YI) is a non-partisan research and advocacy organization focused on critical economic issues facing young people ages 18 to 34, one of them being access to affordable health care. We're based in Houston and Austin, and seek to connect, support, train and organize women of color, low-income women, and young women who are engaged in policy advocacy. We believe keeping young women's leadership at the center is key to advancing holistic care and achieving good maternal health outcomes.

Texas has important health programs for women, including the Healthy Texas Women program (HTW). At YI, we work across the state directly with low income young people, bringing awareness to these programs and educating them on where and how to seek help if they are dealing with postpartum mood disorders. We are pleased to see HHSC's strategic plan includes increasing awareness of maternal mental health challenges, adding mental health counseling as a covered benefit in "Healthy Texas Women-Plus", and expanding telehealth and telemedicine for maternal mental health through Medicaid, CHIP, and Healthy Texas Women-Plus.

Texas has made important steps in improving service delivery, but women of color and low-income women are still experiencing unacceptably poor health outcomes and low health insurance rates. Texas is one of the only states where Medicaid health insurance is typically not available to working low-income women, except during their pregnancy and 60 days after childbirth. The gaps that limit women's access to health care are significant and must be closed. Medicaid is a critical safety net for pregnant women, serving as the primary payer of prenatal care in the state of Texas and covering 53% of our state's births¹. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, Texas held the largest number and percentage of uninsured residents in

¹ Kaiser Family Foundation. <https://www.kff.org/medicaid/state-indicator/births-financed-by-medicaid/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

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the United States, with almost one third of young adults in Texas uninsured.²

The greatest opportunity to improve maternal and infant health occurs before and after a woman becomes pregnant. Unfortunately, in Texas, the state's limited Medicaid eligibility requirements have impeded the ability of low-income, non-pregnant women to find coverage, allowing potentially treatable conditions to worsen until pregnancy is already established. Hear from Juanita and her experience of not having health coverage in-between her pregnancies, including a loss of access to much needed medication:

<https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/mothersfirst/>.

Medicaid coverage for new mothers from two months to a full year postpartum, would be a significant step forward in improving maternal health outcomes. Extended Medicaid coverage would help ensure that women can access comprehensive health care and services during the postpartum year, a critical window for identifying, treating, and recovering from complications of pregnancy and childbirth and a key opportunity to prevent maternal deaths. The state could also accept federal Medicaid expansion dollars. Medicaid expansion would provide an insurance option to 1.5 million uninsured low-wage Texas adults, according to pre-pandemic estimates.³ In addition to covering adults, Medicaid expansion has been shown to indirectly [decrease the children's uninsured rate](#) by connecting more families with health coverage. The Medicaid program is critical, as many medically necessary services that moms experiencing postpartum complications need are covered by Medicaid but not Healthy Texas Women-Plus.

In addition, HHSC is proposing to eliminate the auto enrollment policy and process in the HTW program. Currently, when coverage under the Medicaid for Pregnant Women program ends, new mothers are automatically transitioned to the HTW program. Auto-enrollment promotes continuity of care for eligible women and any disruption to this process is likely to result in gaps in coverage for new mothers, which would directly undermine the goals of HB750. We recommend a post enrollment process, where new mothers would submit required paperwork in a 90-day window after she is enrolled in HTW. In addition, our state has the opportunity to use the current auto-enrollment process to reach 19-year old Texans aging out of Children's Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and enroll them into HTW as well.

In summary, we are committed to working with our young advocates, legislators, HHSC, and other stakeholders to make sure these new women's and maternal health initiatives are a success. We were also happy to see, as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Texas has temporarily paused the state's

² Matthew Buettgens, Linda J. Blumberg, and Clare Pan, "The Uninsured in Texas: Statewide and Local Area Views," Episcopal Health (Urban Institute), December 2018), https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99498/uninsured_in_texas_2.pdf.

³ Kaiser Family Foundation. <https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/the-coverage-gap-uninsured-poor-adults-in-states-that-do-not-expand-medicaid/>

policy of terminating new moms' Medicaid insurance two months after childbirth. In order to support low income women during this crisis and beyond, we recommend the following policy strategies:

- **Increase postpartum coverage through Medicaid up to one year.** According to the Texas Maternal Mortality and Morbidity Task Force, nearly 60% of maternal deaths occur after 60 days following birth.
- **Sustain and enhance health coverage for all Texas women.** Due to strict eligibility criteria in Texas, most women with low incomes do not qualify for public health programs until they become pregnant. The state should accept federal Medicaid funds to cover low-income Texans.
- **Establish post-enrollment verification for new mothers entering HTW after Medicaid for Pregnant Women expires.** Moms could submit pay stubs or other required paperwork during a temporary period (90-day window) after they are enrolled in HTW.
- **Use the current auto-enrollment process to reach 19-year old Texans aging out of Children's Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).** Reduces barriers to preventive healthcare access by removing the burden of re-applying for a new program.

Young Invincibles appreciates the opportunity to provide these comments. If you require additional information about the issues raised in this letter, please contact me using the information provided below.

Sincerely,



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